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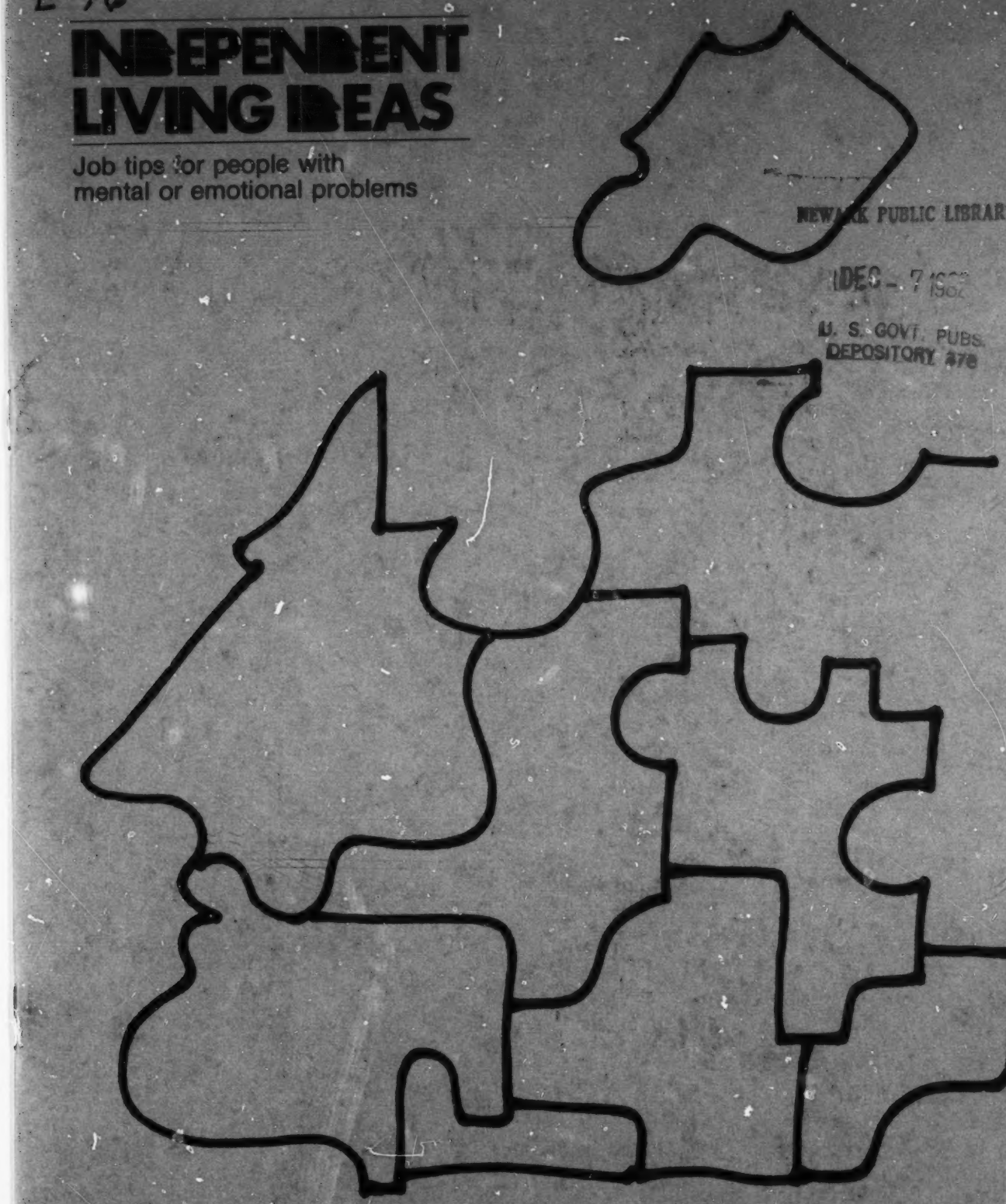
INDEPENDENT LIVING IDEAS

Job tips for people with mental or emotional problems



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The President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped

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Introduction

More people in the United States have mental or emotional disabilities than any other handicap. Millions of people in today's work force are successfully functioning despite these emotional and mental problems.

Employers want to keep good employees. Increasingly, programs are being established within companies which offer employees counseling, rehabilitation for drug and alcohol abuse, for assistance in coping successfully in the world of work.

Yet, at hand is perhaps one of the most sensitive, most hushed up, subjects in today's employment world: employees' mental illness and the impact on the job. It is our intent to be frank and straightforward. Our point of view comes from the basis that all Americans, be they employers, employees or applicants, supervisors or line workers, are subject to stress and strain on the job. They can all suffer the effects. Some may be able to cope; some may break down. Being alert to the signs of breakdown is important to both the employer and the employees.

With discipline, proper care and treatment, qualified people with mental and emotional problems are productive and valuable employees.

By William A. Fraenkel, Ph.D.

Defining the Problem

A wide range of different types of words and phrases are used to describe mentally ill and emotionally disturbed persons. Words in the professional lexicon of psychologists and psychiatrists are descriptions of human conditions: "depressed", "manic", "phobic", "compulsive", "suicidal", "psychotic", others. These words conjure up vivid images of people and their behaviors.

Most non-professional terms are negative, connoting that something is out of synch or not working well, like a faulty gear in a machine. Such terms as "all screwed up", "screws are loose", "weird", "crazy", "strange", or "having a breakdown" are commonly used.

Still other terms in the popular vein suggest that the person has left the scene for awhile and is away from the real world: "out to lunch", "out of your mind", "spaced out", "out of it". These terms often reflect the uncomfortableness of the people describing such persons.

On the other hand, words or phrases used most commonly to describe persons who are now recovered or on the road to recovery suggest a returning to a former healthier state of mind: "mentally restored", "recovered persons", "ex-addict", "cooking with all burners", are but a few. They suggest that confidence and the capacity to work have been regained.

What's your opinion?

It's strange, but our attitudes towards people who may seem different from us tend to result in stereotypes and discrimination against them. Take the case of former mental patients or those with a prior history of emotional or psychological upset. They may be looked upon with suspicion or uncertainty and as people who need to be closely watched, lest another unexpected episode occur.

People tend to stereotype others. Hasty judgments are made, and negative associations are made between an apparent cause and an apparent effect, which is not based on reality.

Thankfully we now are beginning to realize that people who are different can contribute.

So too with former mental patients and those who have had temporary setbacks emotionally or psychologically. Once they get better, they certainly can do physical work or concentrate at mental work or attend to their former jobs or take up different work. Fortunately, our stereotypes are breaking down.

How do you feel about all of this?

One key person, the person with mental or emotional problems, must decide when he or she is ready to resume working again: "I'm ready." "I'm ready to call up my old boss or find a new job. I'm ready to get back to the mainstream. I feel good about myself. I want to be productive. I want to earn my own way. I know it won't be easy but I will try. I know that not everyone will encourage me but there are still some people who will. I'm ready to re-join the world. I'm ready to get up on time, to report to work, to put in a full day. I'm ready to go back to work."

The importance of being productive

People work for a variety of reasons. Most people, of course, work because of the income it brings which permits us to lead independent lives. Some work to enhance the welfare of others; they get their job rewards through their accomplishments. Others work to bring change in some economic, social or political endeavor. They measure their success in the amounts of constructive benefits that are achieved. Others work at jobs because they have aptitudes, skills, abilities or talents that enable them to achieve success. Some people work in family businesses or learn a family trade.

Out of work comes a personal sense of feeling worthwhile, of gaining and holding one's self-respect, of being respected by others, of having a sense of accomplishment, of being happy and feeling satisfied in doing a good day's work.

Most people like their jobs even though there may be some parts that may be unpleasant: the work shift, a fellow worker, the hours of work, the orders that have to be filled, some of the various circumstances that make up the day's work such as the lunch break or the coffee break or car pooling or public transportation. But most people adjust to these annoyances, provided there's a sense of accomplishment in doing a regular day's work.

People who find the little things on the job too

bothersome usually find that they are also dissatisfied and unhappy at their regular job duties. They may need to change jobs or to change attitudes. No job is perfect, yet each job should be looked at as enabling a person to make a contribution of some kind and come away at day's end feeling satisfied. Working can be positive and rewarding. If it isn't, there may be reasons to be concerned.

When people begin to feel unhappy on the job, they usually feel badly about themselves in general. They tend to work less hard and become less interested in their work. If only they could recognize that when they start off the day feeling good about themselves, this feeling carries over on the job. Who doesn't like to see a cheery morning smile? We work better when we feel good about ourselves.

The importance of mental health on the job

We all need to feel confident about our abilities, that we can work well, that we are able to do the tasks required. Confidence leads to one's ability to overcome every-day problems. We face up to problems and don't put them off for later. We also feel comfortable in asking for assistance from our colleagues or the boss, when appropriate.

When we feel good about ourselves, we know both our limits and our potentialities. Out of challenges well met and well handled come feelings of deep personal job satisfaction.

We recognize we can't do all things equally well, yet we have the ability to seek out assistance from those with more experience. And through this recognition we often become more confident in our abilities to tackle more problems. It's all a mental health growing experience. We should finish each day feeling we have accomplished something. And we should feel good about it.

Twenty trouble spots to watch out for

a. **Pressure.** It's usually self-imposed. We take on more than we can handle. The day becomes too much for us.

b. **Tension.** About your boss, about losing out on promotions, about your work, about almost anything else.

c. **Irritability.** Over anything, large or small: being passed over for a raise; drafty office; too much noise; too much quiet.

d. **Lack of concentration.** Due to uncertainties and anxieties; other things on your mind.

e. **Confusion.** About work load, about job assignments, about yourself.

f. **Listlessness.** No apparent reason for it. You just don't care. You can't even keep busy.

g. **Sadness.** About anything. The weekend with no plans. Other workers who ignore you. The world itself.

h. **Edginess.** Anything new on the job—new assignments, new boss, new hours.

i. **Grouchiness.** Caused by bringing your problems to the job. Can't sleep; fought with your best friend; anything.

j. **Angriness.** Over anything, mostly petty things that become magnified. Supervisor, fellow-workers, newsboy on the street.

k. **Discouragement.** Over mistakes made, over new tasks that seem so big, over your ability to work.

l. **Forgetfulness.** Missed appointments, forgotten names of friends.

m. **Anxiety.** Over work schedules, pay raises due, layoffs possible, the boss.

n. **Helplessness.** Unfinished work for the day, inability to solve work problems, the feeling that the job is too much.

o. **Gloominess.** About competence. About anything, from new workers on the job to the rain outside.

p. **Hopelessness.** Everything goes wrong; no way out. Inadequate to cope.

q. **Restlessness.** You get up and pace. Pent-up energy. Can't sleep nights.

r. **Bad temper.** Over anything. Paper not delivered; yesterday's political speech; remark by the boss.

s. **Loneliness.** Alone at work. Not in any "in group." Alone after work.

t. **Elation.** Unrealistic highs. Overachieving. Can't slow down. The engine races at full speed.

Tales of four people

Those twenty characteristics we've listed don't exist in outer space. They exist in people. Here are four cases drawn from life.

A worker who is depressed

This person is exhausted most of the time, always tired and run down. He may have irregular sleep habits and not sleep through the night without getting up once or twice. There's no apparent physical cause for this lack of energy. He just can't seem to get started. He begins to come to work dressed sloppily. Nothing seems to go right. He gets lethargic. He doesn't pay attention. He almost causes an accident on the machine he's operating. He carelessly loses his work tools. His mind is elsewhere, always elsewhere. He seems sad, less friendly. He pulls away from others. Soon he finds himself increasingly alone and miserable. And there's no apparent reason for all this.

A worker who is manic

This person tends to have high energy levels, always on the go. He is into a million projects, rarely finishing any of them. He or she has lots of ideas, few of them practical. The daily work quota suffers. Excessively talkative; it's hard to stop him. Likeable on the surface but after awhile you want to move away from them. He's too much to take at one time. When his boss confronts him about his work schedule or production, he becomes defensive. He can't take criticism. He tends to fight with most authority figures—supervisors or foremen or the boss. He takes on more work than he can handle. Then he begins to feel overworked and unable to keep up. Yet he finds the need always to keep busy. He's a workaholic, coming to work early and leaving late. He takes work home to do at nights and weekends. It seems his work is his life. He appears to be an overachiever but in reality he becomes overwhelmed and at some point unable to function.

A worker who is an alcoholic or substance abuser

This person is insecure though at times he may give the appearance of being assertive and very sure of himself. He puts on a false front with lots of bravado. He tries to be nice to everyone. He doesn't seem to have his own personality; he tries to be all things to all people. After a while, he begins to take longer lunch hours, he starts to arrive late and leave early. Soon he calls in sick, usually on Monday and Friday after a hard abusive weekend. He gives excuse after excuse for not getting his work done on time. Productivity falls. He may start taking a drink or popping a pill on the job. His physical appearance begins to show the results of his abuses. He begins to dress poorly. Grooming deteriorates. He goes into waves of highs and lows and his work shows it. His performance becomes erratic and undependable. By then it's apparent. He's an alcoholic or substance abuser.

A psychiatrically disordered person

This person can manifest strange and unique behavior, unexpected in a work or job situation. The worker becomes overly suspicious of coworkers and begins to think they are plotting against him or saying evil things behind his back. He hears imaginary voices, sees imaginary people who tell him to say odd things that frighten others. He may hold conversations with such imaginary people. He acts irrationally; his thoughts are elsewhere, as if in a trance. He appears preoccupied with other things. He can make poor judgments or faulty decisions. He may overreact out of proportion to the situation at hand. He may use abusive language or have adult tantrums. He may be afraid to ride the elevator or escalators. He may be unable to eat in the cafeteria or use the lavoratory because of "excessive germs." He may wind up in the wash room cleaning his hands endlessly. He can be disorganized, unable to do anything. He needs help.

With all that, there's hope

The hope is outside and inside.

Outside: all the therapies and services available for people with mental and emotional problems.

Inside: your own inner resources, your own capabilities, your own abilities to cope with problems.

Outside help

Depending on type, degree and severity of the problems, workers may require anything from simple job counseling to long-term individual psychotherapy, or group therapy, or perhaps hospitalization (usually short-term).

Psychiatric help and counseling may be obtained through any of the following: Community mental health centers, mental health clinics, day hospitals, day care centers, Veterans Administration hospitals or outpatient clinics, rehabilitation centers, counseling and guidance centers, psychosocial rehabilitation centers, many more.

Sometimes a person gains enough insight or self-understanding that tells him or her that something's wrong, that things are not working out smoothly. It may be a family disagreement that never gets solved. It crops up from time to time on the job, it lingers on at work, it starts to interfere with daily life. Other times a friend, a real friend, may tell you that you ought to go for help, that you have problems requiring professional intervention. Once you get over your initial anger, you start to realize the cold reality: maybe it's true. You acknowledge that something is the matter with you and that you better go for help. Still other times, your boss or supervisor may call you in to talk to you about your poor job performance. As he begins to go over a list of social, interpersonal and job problems you've been having, you can take his comments as signs that you may need professional help.

Hopefully, after you get help, you'll be back to the job in a reasonably short time. Even so, you may find the need for self-insurance and partake of some form of after-care program after you are back on the job. This usually takes the form of individual or group therapy. At some point, these therapies are decreased, then stopped. You feel fully able to function, once again.

In addition to going for professional help, it's important to keep in mind your own motivation to want to get better. No matter what treatment program you start, it's bound to fail unless you yourself *want to get better.* You're the key.

It's unfortunate but perhaps true that you were most likely a large part of your own problem. Perhaps it was the way you acted on the job when you were first criticized; or the way you first used authority; or how you couldn't recognize your limitations; or underachieved; or the way you avoided responsibilities; or abused privileges.

There's no "magic bullet" or "sure cure" to getting well once you've been identified as someone in need of care. It takes time before initial symptoms and signs emerge to suggest that something is wrong. And it takes time to undo some of the past mistakes and inappropriate responses. It's hard work, probably the toughest job you ever took on. You need to be aware that some of the very same habits of old that propelled you into difficulties can work against you again while you are in treatment. You have to approach each new therapy appointment, treatment group or relationship in a positive way. Sound like hard work? It is! And you have to want to get well. Sometimes therapy can be painful and difficult. It's not easy admitting you're not the person you thought you were. You have to acknowledge your limitations and build on your potentials, your strengths. You can do it!

Inside help—what's your attitude?

As you complete your basic treatment program and prepare for eventual discharge, your attitudes toward treatment, and how you feel about yourself, are critical. You need to be able to come to terms with yourself, to recognize and accept those previous limitations that got you into difficulty. You have to be able to put them in proper context, and not allow them to become reactivated. If you seemingly cannot avoid certain job pressures for good reason, then avoid taking jobs where they exist. No need to walk right into a situation that once proved disastrous. A good prize fighter never leaves himself open to a sucker punch!

Know your potentials and build on them. You have far more to offer a new job than you'll imagine. Treatment can help you learn how to avoid old pitfalls and how to cope with unavoidable problems. You may find it easier changing the type of work you do yet remain in the same general field. Or you may wish to move completely out of your previous area and start afresh. You may only need a refresher course to find suitable work. Or longer training for a new field. These are endless opportunities to explore.

For example, if you were an airlines stewardess and couldn't handle the endless traveller requests, putting on a pleasant face even though you didn't feel up to it, check out the front office for another job in sales or customer relations or flight information. If you've been on a production line of an assembly plant where the pressure is on for higher quotas, take another job with a smaller company where the pressures may be less. Suppose you sold insurance and had to schedule night meetings with prospective clients, so that your marriage started to fall apart; look for a daytime sales job where your evenings are free.

Finally, there's the all important question of what information to share with employers if references are needed or a new job is in question. What information to declare? What to say? What not to say? How to account for your previous gap in employment? Deny

the fact that you obtained psychiatric care and are now ready to return to work? Make up a false story about the lost time? If you do this, what new problems do you create for yourself? Aren't you in a sense denying you were ever in need of help? Aren't you saying there never was anything wrong with you, so why admit to it? If you avoid facing up to this critical issue, wouldn't you be devaluating the treatment that restored you?

On the other hand, you know you can't expect everyone to receive you with open arms. Acceptance of mental illness hasn't yet reached a state of such understanding and acceptance. Few people find it possible to state, "Hi, I'm back. I'm no longer a mental patient. I'm fully restored." Even the returning G.I.'s never were fully embraced by family, friends and employers. They came back from their war experiences as different people. It took time on both the part of the veterans and the others to adjust to one another.

Similarly, the returning former mental hospital patient, now restored, has to remember the way he appeared to be in the eyes of others before his treatment. Some of the old fears and memories of former upsets may linger on. Add to this the mystique still surrounding mental illness, and you can understand the need for a trying-out period. The former patient should be able to utilize this time period productively. Support and encouragement are needed to help bridge the gap from being considered a former mental patient to being accepted as a full citizen. It may not always come about gracefully, but it's sure to come. You can help make it a reality by being more confident and by putting forth your best efforts.

There still remains the overriding question as to what to say about your emotional disablement or mental handicap. There's nothing to be gained by being a martyr. So what do you say? How much do you say? To whom do you say it? Ultimately each person has to feel right about what he or she will say and to whom. The key: "To whom is this information going and for what purpose?"

It needs to be pointed out that under Sections 503 and 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended, former mental patients need not declare themselves on employment application forms; employers may not discharge these people, if they find out afterwards. This suggests that, if the former mental patient feels too threatened by such a question, it may be best to leave it unanswered. One need not be forced to fabricate a story or deny the reality. Of greater importance is the employee's ability to perform the work that is required.

In other instances, short gaps in one's work record can be explained by suggesting you took some time off to work out some particular personal problems.

Most people will need to discuss this matter with a close friend or relative before taking any actions.

And now the time has come

To paraphrase a commercial cigarette ad of some national renoun. . . "You've come a long way, friend." Your efforts should now start to pay off. The rest should be more procedural though you're still not out of the woods. You've put a lot of groundwork into your returning to work. From here on in, it ought to be somewhat easier. Here are some simple suggestions.

Prepare a new job resumé

Look over your previous work record. Be sure it reflects the kinds of work you now feel able to do. You may have to rephrase some of your old material so that it is in tune with your current job search. Focus on things you can do well. Feature those aspects of the job that you feel most comfortable with. List those things you previously did well and gave you the least problems. Avoid references to items that may have contributed to your setback. You're probably not going to engage in these activities anyway.

Decide how you will cover any gaps in your work history or reasons for leaving your previous employer. These could cause question on the part of the new employer. It's an area you don't want to gloss over, neither do you want to call particular attention to it. Strike a happy balance and put down appropriate reasons already suggested in this booklet.

Compile a list of people to call upon for help

List persons you feel you can count on for references if they are needed. Though not every employer may require that you list references, it would be good to be prepared. Should you include your most recent employer? You probably should. This may require your calling or visiting him to discuss the matter. You may need to seek the assistance of a close personal friend or a counselor from a social agency to formulate a positive statement about your last

job. Of course, a lot will depend upon the conditions surrounding your leaving it. Of equal importance will be the way you now appear to be in the eyes of your former employer.

It's possible that you could be rehired at your old place of work. But if you wind up with a poor reference, then you'll have to try to at least get a good statement for the things you did well. It'll be up to you to balance off negative input from your previous employer with positive feelings about your new job search.

List a close personal friend as a reference. Include a vocational counselor or a previous therapist. This person should be able to state in positive terms how you are now functioning and your future expectations. Good luck!

Some agencies that can help

Vocational rehabilitation

To be eligible for vocational rehabilitation, one has to have a physical, mental or emotional handicap which interferes with the ability to work. You may need special job placement assistance in order to find work. You may need more basic skill training or vocational counseling or additional education before you can expect to be ready to be placed on a job. State vocational rehabilitation agencies are listed in your local telephone directory. Look them up under State Government Services listings. They can probably be of help or direct you elsewhere.

State employment services

To be eligible for these services persons should have had some previous work experience or pretty much know what kinds of jobs they'd like to have. Employment offices usually have solid labor market information that can assist you to learn where jobs can be found, where there are worker shortages or where the better opportunities may lie. Most offices have Job Banks which can put you into immediate touch with vacancies. You can see on a visual scanner current job offers, types of work, starting pay, employee benefits, experience requirements, whom to see for a job interview. Most state employment agencies work closely with State vocational rehabilitation agencies. State employment agencies also can be located in your local telephone directory under State Services.

Veterans Administration

Veterans in search of employment opportunities can use either vocational rehabilitation or employment services, or may choose to register with a regional office of the Veterans Administration. Here one may receive job counseling, testing, training or retraining or educational opportunities, if eligible. Sometimes all that may be needed is a short refresher course; other times, more extensive training. VA works closely with State agencies providing training and job placement. Look VA up in the phone book under Federal Agencies.

Community mental health centers or clinics

Another community resource is the area community mental health center or clinic. These centers usually have specialized services for people returning to the job scene who need supportive counseling or guidance. Some centers or clinics provide vocational testing and special therapeutic services that help you re-enter the world of work. They can ease you over the hurdles or help you cope with that first job interview. They can evaluate how you present yourself to an employer; they can get you ready to say positive things about yourself to help you land the job. Look them up in the phone book under Mental Health Services.

Other community resources

Other specialized community resources are available: day treatment centers, work activitiy centers, sheltered workshops or transitional employment centers.

Day treatment services usually are for those in need of fundamental personal and interpersonal skill training: getting along with others. There may be modest work adjustment training offered as a part of the overall treatment.

Work activity centers are for those who lack good work habits and who need more structured work training. Rates of pay are minimal. The focus is on preparation for either sheltered work, training or transitional employment.

Sheltered workshops enable people to engage in remunerative work under the kind of conditions you will find at a regular job. They give you the chance to try out new interpersonal relationships as well as job skills. They can build your tolerance for full regular work.

Transitional employment centers are about the closest one can get to regular employment. Working conditions and employee expectations are what you

will find at a regular competitive job.

Trainees might earn regular wage rates. They usually graduate into jobs in the open labor market after a short training period.

Most of these five kinds of specialized community services, or variations of them, are offered through some kind of State or local organization. Goodwill Industries, Jewish Vocational Services, Mental Health Associations and other similar agencies provide these services. Most are to be found in the phone book under Social Services, Sheltered Workshops or Vocational Guidance Agencies.

Talk to colleagues and friends

Before you plan to embark on any new job venture, talk to some of your friends and colleagues. Ask them for their opinions. Express any fears or anxieties about returning to work. Listen to what they say. Take their advice if it sounds good. Maybe they can help you land that first interview. Sometimes the right call at the right time by a friend can open a door that might otherwise remain locked.

Start making the rounds

Try employers with Government contracts covered by Section 503 which requires affirmative action programs for the hiring, placement and advancement of qualified handicapped people when they receive Federal funds. Included are mentally restored persons. Call on State government agencies in your job search since they too are required to maintain affirmative action programs. Also contact employers with Government grants covering handicapped people. Section 504 also protects any employee who may refuse to reveal information about a former mental condition. In some cases it is unlawful to ask that question on an employment application form. However, it may be advisable to confide such information to an appropriate prospective employer if it's going to help your employment. Some employers may want it to modify parts of the job assignment so as to enhance your chances of success. Try to understand why the employer is requesting this kind of information before you decide whether to give it.

Look for jobs where there's a noticeable demand for workers, where there are labor shortages, where there are minimal entrance requirements, where there are no previous job experience requirements. Keep a log of where you've been, who you saw, the kinds of jobs you are looking for, the reasons given to you for no work. Review that log periodically. See if you can figure out ways to improve your chances of finding work. Ask yourself some honest questions like these: Do you get to the interview on time? Are you properly dressed for the interview? Would you be ready to start working that same day if a job were offered to you? Do you have a resume in your pocket? Is it presentable? Accurate? Does it account for the time you lost from your previous job? Do you know what to say to the new boss about why you left your previous job? How's your mood each time you apply for work? Down in the mouth? Tense or anxious? Or cheerful, positive and with self-confidence? The way you look or appear to others often influences the way they react to you. So try to come on showing your best side.

Finally, finally. . . you land a job!

Some tips to follow

Ease into work again. Don't plunge right in with all engines blasting.

Report to work on time. Meet your new supervisor, coworkers, others. Be appropriately groomed and dressed. Start in on a regular schedule. Get yourself organized. Keep your work station neat and clean. Know where everything is. Do the best you can the first day. Leave the job on time. Begin the next day as before. Pace yourself. Work at a regular rate. Try to keep up with the work to be done.

Relax.

Do the best you can. Talk to other workers when it's appropriate. Be friendly. Be sociable. Don't take on more than you can handle. Get through the first week as best you can.

Should any of the feelings about previous job upsets come back, deal with them right away. Don't let them build up. Remember that you're better now. Remember that you have changed. Remember that you are different now. Do your best. Keep occupied. Keep busy. Keep your mind on your job. Relax during your break time. Try to make new friends on the job. Keep active. Join in with the others. You can do it. You're better now. You're stronger. You're back to work.

The days pass more quickly as the end of the week approaches. Soon it's Friday. Pay day. Your first check! You ought to feel great. Budget your

money for the coming week. Stay within your budget. Pat yourself on the back. You deserve it. You're working again. You're back with new friends, a new job and new opportunities. You should feel very good about yourself. You've worked hard. You're recovered. You're back to work.
Good luck!

Agency listings

Persons interested in learning of the where-abouts of the agencies and services mentioned in this booklet should first look them up in the local telephone directory. If you need additional assistance locating a specific agency, sometimes the telephone operator may be of help. Make your own list of agencies which can be of help to you. Here are some of them:

Local Vocational Rehabilitation Office
Local Public Employment Office
Veterans Administration Regional Office
Local Mental Health Association
Community Mental Health Agency
Goodwill Industries
Jewish Vocational Service

DIGNITY, EQUALITY, INDEPENDENCE
FOR DISABLED ADULTS

The President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped
Washington, D.C. 20210